

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT TIP SHEET

Addressing Inappropriate Student Comments

THE OFFICE OF STUDENT CONDUCT AND JUDICIAL AFFAIRS

Langara.

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Many kinds of comments can be unsuitable within the learning environment. You are encouraged to use your discretion in identifying what comments are not appropriate and what may be provocative, but acceptable to the exchange of ideas in a learning context.

Discriminatory comments

Instructors, like all Langara employees, have an obligation to uphold the principles outlined in the BC Human Rights Code and Langara policies. The kinds of inappropriate comments students most often made in the classroom pertain to race (including cultural and religious stereotypes), sexual orientation, sex and age.

Instructors hear students making comments that are not conducive to a respectful and productive learning environment. Instructors are advised to address these comments.

Disrespectful comments

Inappropriate comments that insult, demean or belittle others are not appropriate in the learning environment. Inappropriate comments, other than discriminatory comments, often pertain to general appearance (physical characteristics and dress for example), mental acuity (intelligence, comprehension or attentiveness), financial status or social standing among others.

What to do

To maintain a tone of classroom decorum and to ensure a safe and productive learning environment instructors are advised to address inappropriate classroom comments as soon as they arise. Responses should be behaviour-based (observed or heard), rather than personality or judgment based.

If you hear the comment yourself

Stop what you are doing and address the class.

1. Acknowledge the comment identifying the speaker. "Bill, I believe I just heard you say..."
2. Advise the speaker that the comment is not appropriate. "The comment you made is... (discriminatory, offensive, demeaning, etc.)"
3. Explain why it is not appropriate. "I expect all students to demonstrate courteous and respectful interaction appropriate to an academic environment."
4. Meet with the student after class and explain what you will do if it happens again. "Should you make comments of this kind in the future, you will be required to immediately leave the classroom. If comments of this kind persist, the matter will be referred to... (identify to whom it will be referred)"

You heard something but aren't sure what

When you acknowledge the comment say: "I think I heard someone make the following comment. If that is the case..." and follow the steps outlined above.

You're told about it afterwards

At the next opportunity bring it up with the class in the same way as above, but omit identifying the original commentator. Because of the time delay the advantage of immediacy is lost.

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Will it embarrass the student?

Acknowledging a student who is responsible for a behavioral choice is a natural consequence of that choice. Your aim is to correct the behaviour for everyone's benefit and set the tone for future classroom behaviour.

Shouldn't it be done privately?

Private conversations are often helpful and appropriate. But keep in mind that a private conversation with a student will not address the interests of the group. A public comment has an impact on the whole. Private conversations may assist the individual but the group will not know what has been done; often leaving them to assume that nothing has been done.

Things to avoid

Ignoring it

People sometimes think that ignoring an inappropriate comment is the best way to avoid drawing attention to it. By not drawing attention to it, the thinking goes, we are communicating that

it's not worthy of comment or recognition. But keep in mind that inappropriate comments affect the group as a whole and no action is often interpreted as tacit approval.

Turning it into a joke

Classroom management involves managing student interactions so they don't escalate into something more complex. Humor is an excellent way to de-escalate potential conflict.

However, for comments of the kind mentioned above, using humor rather than direct correction, can actually create the impression that you are party to and condone the comments.

Shaming the speaker

Shame is an effective way to silence someone, but it is not effective to promote meaningful or long-lasting change. Comments like "Only the most bigoted people say things like that," or "You'll never get anywhere if you act like that," may stop the outward expression but will do little to change the thinking behind the behaviour.